

LETTER

Integrating Cultural Context into Personalized AI Mental Health Support

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As generative AI tools are increasingly deployed across diverse settings, how should personalization account for cultural context? Dr. Kotera raised this important question¹ in response to our recent trial evaluating the use of Flourish, an AI-powered well-being app, among students across three U.S. institutions.² The version evaluated in that trial did not use racial, ethnic, or national identity for personalization and did not test cultural adaptation. Understanding how well such support translates across cultural contexts is therefore an important future direction.

Cultural context can offer useful signals for personalization. Although cultures vary along many dimensions, one well-established axis is the independent versus interdependent construal of self, which can shape both conceptions of well-being and preferences for support. U.S. culture, for example, places greater emphasis on influencing (vs. adjusting to) one's environment than East Asian cultures, and decades of research on ideal affect³ link these influence goals to European American participants' greater valuation of excitement and other high-arousal positive states, relative to East Asian American and East Asian participants. The same framework may shape what people want from AI: Relative to Chinese participants, European American participants placed greater importance on control over what AI does and less on feeling connected to it.⁴ Together, these findings suggest that voluntarily reported cultural values and preferences could provide a starting point for personalizing what conversational AI offers in terms of well-being support.

At the same time, cultural differences reflect distributions in populations rather than fixed characteristics of individuals. Similarly, cultural fit is not uniform across an intervention: Kotera and colleagues emphasize that different components may require different degrees or types of adaptation (Kotera Y, Ronaldson A, Henderson C, Slade M. Quantifying cultural distance to inform international transfer of mental health approaches. *World Psychiatry* 2026; in press.). Cultural context can help identify which components need adapting, while local participation and contextual evidence can further refine those adaptations.

Generative AI may make such fine-grained adaptation feasible at scale, as a continuous rather than one-time, population-level process. Flourish already personalizes at the individual level: Users identify a well-being goal at onboarding, and repeated interactions with Sunnie build and update a dynamic coping strategies profile that informs ongoing, just-in-time support.² Cultural context could extend this process. For example, a user's reported cultural values

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could set the prior on how strongly the recommendation algorithm emphasizes high-arousal positive states, with that prior updated through subsequent interactions.

Future research should determine which cultural values and preferences matter for which aspects of an intervention, how much weight such signals should receive over time, and whether dynamic updating improves outcomes across cultural settings.

Disclosures

Author disclosures are available at ai.nejm.org.

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